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ABSTRACT

This paper describes transitional programs developed by Black Hills Special Services Cooperative (BHSSC) to meet the needs of disabled students in rural areas. In cooperation with other public and private agencies, BHSSC provides comprehensive vocational rehabilitation services and community living programs to help individuals with severe disabilities enter and maintain employment. The entrepreneurial model was implemented by BHSSC to create and operate new businesses that employ special education students in an integrated work environment. The integrated work environment provides non-handicapped individuals as appropriate role models for handicapped students. This model has been implemented in four sites and has served approximately 150 special education students. The sites include textile manufacturing, furniture manufacturing, and wood working. Since BHSSC is the employer, the work environment is accommodating to meet the students' unique needs that cannot be met in a private business. Preliminary data suggest that the entrepreneurial model may be a viable approach to providing employment opportunities in rural areas for disabled students. This model also demonstrates that properly supported workers with handicapping conditions can be profitably employed in rural areas. (LP)

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Supported Employment for Students At Risk Within Rural Settings

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Supported Employment for Students At Risk Within Rural Settings

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Abstract

Developing effective vocational rehabilitation, supported employment, and community living programs within rural settings is often difficult due to the lack of services and trained staff available within rural communities, the great distances between communities and job sites, and small and homogeneous economies. Black Hills Special Services Cooperative (BHSSC) serves a geographic area of 10,600 square miles in western South Dakota. The north to south and east to west boundaries exceed 200 miles, with one major city of 80,000 people. The area is characterized by small rural communities whose economies are primarily based in agriculture, mining, and forest products industries. To overcome the constraints in providing effective vocational education and job placement services, BHSSC developed the entrepreneur model of supported employment. The entrepreneur model calls for the creation of new businesses, within rural communities, which provide meaningful work in integrated employment settings.

The goal of the entreprenurial model is to increase the diversity, quantity, and quality of paid, integrated work opportunities to students with disabilities. BHSSC utilizes a zero reject model for services and believes all individuals, regardless of severity of handicap, can make a successful transition from school to integrated competitive or supported employment.

RC 018523

Obstacles for Rural Service Delivery

The major challenge facing rural communities is the implementation of effective models of employment and residential services that allow individuals with severe disabilities to enter and maintain meaningful employment. Characteristics of rural settings often limit the utility of existing supported employment models. These characteristics are:

1) Low population density resulting in a high concentration of individuals with handicapping conditions in rural towns where supportive services are available;

2) Great distance between service centers which limits the utility of work crews and independent placements because of the travel time and distance between sites, i.e. supervision when placements are 50 miles apart, the economics of obtaining a contract for services when travel to the work site takes one hour.

3) A small and homogeneous economic base which limits the types of jobs available, i.e., agricultural based communities have fewer manufacturing opportunities than an industrial based community. In South Dakota, 82% of businesses employ less than 9 employees, with 91.4% of businesses having fewer than 20 employees. Additionally, since rural economies are often limited to a few businesses, the variety of employment options is often limited. Thus, it is often difficult to meet the unique needs of individuals with severe handicapping conditions within existing businesses.

4. Lack of trained staff. Many rural communities are not able to attract staff trained in supported employment. This is often due to scarcity of programs; low salaries in rural communities; and lack of employment opportunities for other family members.

BHSSC Program Overview

These obstacles in rural communities, can be overcome through the development of innovative cooperative partnerships between public and state agencies and the private sector. Black Hills Special Services Cooperative, the South Dakota Section for Special Education, Division of Vocational Education, Department of Vocational Rehabilitation and private business and industry worked cooperatively to develop a comprehensive vocational education and training program that would assist students at risk in the transition from school to employment. Components of the program include:

1. Working partnerships with business communities

BHSSC coordinated with local business and industry to secure work experience, on-the-job training, supported work sites, and competitive employment for handicapped and disadvantaged students, and adults with disabilities. These partnerships have provided necessary transitional and supported employment for BHSSC students, and have also resulted in major economic development within several rural communities. BHSSC has placed many students with numerous other businesses through out the region and continues to explore new endeavors.

2. Vocational Special Needs Programs

BHSSC's vocational special needs program encompasses day and residential services, itinerant services to public school secondary programs, and consultation with area's post-secondary vocational school. The day and residential programs serve approximately 152 students with special needs. Ninety five of the students are aged 16 years and over, and are involved in the vocational special needs program. These students have a variety of handicapping conditions ranging from students with severe and multiple mental, physical, sensory, medical and/or behavioral handicaps to students with severe behavioral or emotional handicaps with mild to moderate impairments of cognitive functioning.

3. Vocational Assessment Units

BHSSC currently operates three vocational evaluation units that have a full-range of assessment capabilities. Assessment in the areas of work skills and abilities, cognitive and motor functioning, vocational aptitude and interest testing, and career awareness is available. The Vocational Assessment Center, which is located in Sturgis, SD provides services in house and on a referral basis. Two mobile units were established to expand vocational assessment services throughout the state of South Dakota and surrounding geographic areas.

4. Career Learning Center

The Career Learning Center provides vocational counseling, job development, job training, and rehabilitation services to recently graduated, post secondary individuals, and unemployed adults in the western region of S.D.. The Career Learning Center maintains partnerships with South Dakota Department of Labor/Job Service, S.D. Department of Rehabilitation, Western Dakota Vocational Technical Institute, Black Hills State University, South Dakota School of Mines, National College of Business, and the University of South Dakota and South Dakota State University extension programs at Ellsworth A.F.B. in Rapid City. Participants enter into a program of instruction which includes basic and remedial education, life-coping skills, and job-seeking and maintaining skills. The final stage of the program is a self-directed search for employment.

5. Secondary Alternative Program

BHSSC's Secondary Alternative Program provides alternative education for junior and senior high aged students who have/could not succeed in traditional secondary programs. Approximately 54 students are currently placed within the Alternative Program. Students are referred to the Alternative Program through local school districts, State Department of Social Services, Court Services, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and other state and federal agencies. Approximately 80% of Alternative Program students reside within BHSSC residential programs. The majority of students have mild to moderate cognitive impairments and all students present mild to severe behavioral and/or emotional disorders. Individual Education Plans are developed for students within the alternative program, addressing educational, vocational, independent living, and community integration needs.

6. Transitional/Independent Living Programs

BHSSC provides a variety of residential options for students placed within the Secondary Alternative Program. These options are viewed as temporary until the student can return to their home community. Within the residential alternatives is a continuum of services which follows the practice of least restrictive alternative. That is as the students demonstrate their ability to live more independently, they are given the opportunity to do so, with supervision being gradually faded out. Included among BHSSC's residential alternatives are:

Attention Center - residential group treatment for up to 16 adolescents aged 12 to 18 years. The Attention Center provides a therapeutic milieu for youth experiencing emotional difficulties.

Small Group Foster Homes - provides individualized treatment for 4-6 students in need of a transitional step between group residential treatment and independent living or traditional family foster care.

Independent Living Program - utilizes a supervised apartment for individuals aged 16-21 years, who are in need of independent living training.

Family Foster Care - provides traditional family living for individual students. Family foster homes receive support and intervention through BHSSC.

Independent Apartments with Follow Along Services-Students who have completed the Independent Living Program and are involved in supported employment, can make the transition to their own apartments. These students continue to receive follow-along support through BHSSC.

Entreprenurial Model

Barriers which effect transition from school to integrated community employment include:

-Individualization of training and job site adaptations to meet specific needs of workers;
-The ability of persons with severe disabilities to transition from secure and structured environments to more independent and demanding environments;
-The lack of resources and options for long-term ongoing support in the workplace;
-The willingness of employers to hire individuals who may not produce or achieve at a full competitive level;
-The willingness and ability of employers to provide accommodations with in the workplace for job coaches and other adaptations of work environment;
-The tolerance of the employer and co-workers in regards to inappropriate behaviors.

BHSSC created a work environment which was designed to overcome these specific obstacles by creating new businesses, that are operated by BHSSC, that employ students in an integrated work environment. To date, the model has been implemented in four sites serving approximately 150 special education students. Students who participate in the program exhibit a variety of challenges, i.e., emotional/behavioral disabilities, mental retardation, autism, multiple disabilities, etc. The severity of disability condition ranges from mild to severe/profound, see Table 1.

Table 1 Description of Students

SEX (N=168)		Age: (N=75)	
male	120	12 yr old	3
female	48	13	1
		14	6
		15	10
		16	12
Ethnicity (N=163)		17	19
Black	3	18	13
Caucasian	113	19	5
Hispanic	1	20	4
Native American	46	21	6

Disabilities (N=143, 120 have 2 or more disabilities,duplicated count)

Attention Deficit	8
Autism	21
EBD	65
Traumatic Brain Injury	1
Learning Disability	24
Mental Retardation	82
Mild/Moderate	41
Severe/Profound	41
Health	9

Entrepreneurial sites:

Textile manufacturing BHSSC textile manufacturing site is a result of a partnership developed in 1985 with Dragons Are Too Seldom, Inc. a South Dakota-based corporation which designs and markets bathtub puppets. Approximately 30-40 non-handicapped employees work side-by-side with individuals with handicaps. Approximately 82 students are involved in supported employment through textile manufacturing, working from one to six hours per day. The amount of time spent in supported employment is determined by the individual's interdisciplinary team and unique needs. Students assist in the manufacturing, assembly, packaging, and shipping of a variety of textile products. The most notable product is the Tub Buddies @ bathtub puppets and Snooz Zoo products.

Furniture Manufacturing BHSSC's partnership with Child's Play, Inc., includes the production of children's furniture. The furniture is built at a manufacturing site in Sturgis, SD The goal of these programs is to train individuals in wood working and carpentry skills for placement in other industrial settings. Furniture manufacturing employs 11 students and 2 non-handicapped supervisors. A children's furniture line is manufactured and distributed nation wide. Students are integrated into all aspects of construction, upholstery, packaging, and shipping of the units.

Wood Working. BHSSC partnerships with Child's Play, GSC International, and Glenwood have resulted in the production of several wood products. These include wood blocks, wooden toys, gunstocks, and childrens wooden furniture. This production facilitiy has included disabled veterans who receive services at the Ft. Meade VA. Fifty five veterans, 15 students, and 10 non-handicapped coworkers are employed.

Sample wage and hour data for students enrolled the project are provided in table 2.

Table 2 Wage and hour data for students

Hourly Wage (N=109)		Amount	N
Mean	$2.05	$0.00 - 1.00	25
Range	$.41 - $5.50	1.01 - 2.00	31
		2.01 - 3.00	21
		3.01 ≥	32
Hours per Week (N=85)		**Hours/Wk**	**N**
Mean	14.3 hrs.	0 - 5	16
Range	2 - 20 hrs.	6 - 10	19
		11 - 15	17
		16 ≥	33

Summary

Existing models for supported employment may not be well-suited to many rural areas. The entrepreneurial model may provide a suitable approach to the provision of supported employment services in areas where other models have limited utility. This is not to say that the use of other models should be abandoned. BHSSC, for example, continues to utilize the individual placement model of supported employment, when appropriate, for special education students throughout the twelve member districts.

At this time, preliminary data suggest that the entrepreneurial model may be a viable approach to providing supported employment opportunities in rural areas. Using the entrepreneurial model, BHSSC has provided work sites for students who might otherwise have been unemployed. Since BHSSC is the employer, the work environment can be more accommodating, compared to a private business setting, to meet the unique needs of students. For example students who display verbal and physical aggression in the work setting, risk being fired and jeopardizing future placements. The staff at BHSSC are able to provide support services necessary to deal with the student in the work setting. Similarly, students who require more intensive training and/or supports than are available in many employment settings can also be served.

Furthermore, the work sites provided are close to ideal in terms of work-force integration. Non-handicapped employees provide appropriate models for social skills, work habits, and co-worker interactions.

Finally, this model appears to be fiscally responsible. BHSSC workers engage in meaningful work and earn wages. Further, the model contributes to rural economic development by hiring workers from the local communities. The BHSSC entrepreneurial sites demonstrate that properly supported workers with handicapping conditions can be profitably employed in rural areas.